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ABSTRACT

Despite passage of affirmative-action legislation in the United States, the percentage of women school superintendents has increased at a very slow pace. This paper identifies the major challenges faced by four female entry-level superintendents and the strategies they used to deal with them. Data were collected during a group interview with the four superintendents at the end of their first year on the job. All had entered new school districts after gaining experience as assistant superintendents. The superintendents, three white and one African-American, utilized some similar strategies to handle issues. During their first year on the job, the women: (1) learned to recognize and accept politics as a reality; (2) entered the job with a formal entry plan and later developed a district plan; (3) engaged in learning and open communication with all stakeholders; (4) studied past practices; (5) practiced creative problem solving rather than confrontation; (6) protected their personal/family time; and (7) educated and provided information to the school board. (Contains 17 references.) (LMI)

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First Year District Superintendents :
Women Reflect on Contradictions Between Education and Politics

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First Year District Superintendents :

Women Reflect on Contradictions Between Education and Politics

Dr. Barbara Nelson Pavan Temple University

Statement of Purpose and Rationale

In spite of affirmative action efforts including the passage of Title IX in 1972 and the Glass Ceiling Act of the Civil Rights Act of 1991, the percentage of school superintendents who are women has been merely creeping up at a very slow pace. This continues to be puzzling since by 1990, women earned 59% of the master's degrees and 51% of the doctoral degrees in educational administration (Snyder, 1993). During the years from 1970 to 1980 less than 1% of the superintendents in Pennsylvania were women. In 1985 (Pavan) only 18 (3.6 %) of the Pennsylvania superintendents were women, a figure slightly larger than the national level (Shakeshaft, 1989). National data complied by Glass (1992), which includes K-8 districts that are not found in Pennsylvania, determined that 6.4 % of the superintendents were women while in Pennsylvania, 28 women held this role or 5.6% of the positions (Pavan, Winkler, & Dovey, 1995.) This number was increased to 34 (6.8%) in the 1993-94 year when the women studied here assumed the role of superintendent. As the result of a retirement incentive bill and (one hopes) a changed public attitude, there were 50 female superintendents in Pennsylvania in the 1994-1995 school year, an astounding jump to 10 %. As delightful as this change is to contemplate, there exists in this state a sufficient number of certified and experienced women to more than double this number. The lack of female school administrators cannot be blamed on the women's unwillingness to get the needed credentials or to make extensive job search efforts (Pavan, 1988b, 1989.)

Some recent studies have looked at women moving into their entry level superintendency. Tallerico and Burstyn (1994) gleaned from Glass's 1992 study of the superintendency that women are found in higher proportions in very small, rural districts with fewer than 300 students. In such small districts, the superintendent wears many hats and has no other administrator to delegate the myriad of tasks. Relations with the school board and the community are very close, leading to very high levels of stress for the superintendent and to a short tenure for the incumbent superintendent. They conclude that these "starter districts" are very unfavorable places for women to begin their superintendency and that search consultants should sponsor women for more favorable contexts.

A former Peace Corps member, who as the result of her election campaign of "Children First", moved directly from the classroom to her first superintendency in a poor district with 13,000 students, was followed by Curcio (1994) during her entry year. She documented the time needed to build relationships before this idealistic superintendent could effect change in the district. Scherr's (1994) case studies of two entry level female superintendents found both the outsider and the insider spending the majority of their time building relations, but the insider could more comfortably delegate communication responsibilities to her deputies. Only the outsider noted gender as a barrier, but the insider worked in a district where 50% of the principals and of her cabinet were women.

The purpose of this study was to determine the major issues faced by four female entry level superintendents, how they handled these situations, and the strategies they used in their first year as superintendents. Since these women have different personal characteristics and work in quite different districts, it had been expected that their experiences might be quite different. Of particular interest were their efforts to build community cohesion.

Data Source and Methods

At the beginning of the 1993-1994 school year, four women who completed their doctorates with me as their advisor, began their first superintendencies. While these woman shared a common doctoral program, they rarely shared classes so that even their educational experience was not totally similar. They assumed their first superintendency in the same state and during the same year. The individual backgrounds of the individuals and their school districts have both similarities and differences as noted below. After their first year had concluded; we met together as a group so that they could explore these experiences. These women had known me since the beginning of their doctoral study (one for almost 20 years) and they had kept in close contact often using me as a sounding board for job related issues. Two of the women had worked in the same school district and knew each other quite well. The trust level was very high due to their relationship with me over the years. This meant that much more could be accomplished in a four hour interview than would be possible if no such relationship existed. Additionally, I am able to call each woman at any time to clarify their viewpoints.

The interview was structured by a number of questions posed by the interviewer, but these were augmented by the responses given. Obviously the order of the questions was also altered to enable the dialogue to flow in a more naturalistic way and therefore, allow time to develop thoughtful responses. Unlike previous research, this is not a series of individual interviews; but a sharing of experiences among this group. Listening to the others triggered remembrances that might not otherwise have been uncovered. Commonalities and differences became readily apparent as they talked together. In fact, at times the discussion became a problem solving session where the women traded experiences and helped each other

determine strategies for action. The women were open and supportive of each other, yet would present differing opinions reflective of their individual beliefs. They seemed to prefer the group format over the individual interview format because it enabled them to learn from hearing the experiences, strategies, and rationales of the other superintendents.

The entire conversation was audio tape recorded and then transcribed to be available for further analysis. The resulting single spaced transcript is 63 pages long. It was then the task of the researcher to find those threads which were common to all the participants and those which were unique to only one of the superintendents. This paper is an initial effort to analyze this quantity of data.

With the exception of newspaper articles (mostly about Dr. JM's school district) and district documents given to me by the participants, this research is based on the self reports of these superintendents. Concern as to the validity of their remarks might be held except for the way in which they were using this interview time to resolve their own issues. The fact that time was not needed for the interviewer to gain the trust of the participants because these women knew her integrity is a major factor in the study. Actually, the session had been presented to them as an opportunity to interact with other female superintendents in similar circumstances.

Findings

Dr. SR '80 while the youngest of the group in her early forties, received her doctorate first. She has worked in six different districts with all her positions since graduation including the word superintendent in the title. She is white, her husband is a physician and they have two school-age children. She is employed in a rural district with 3300 students in five schools which is experiencing rapid growth and becoming a suburban district. At appointment she was the only female superintendent in her

county. The budget process was her first major hurdle and demanded much time and energy.

Dr. JM '87 spent most of her career in the largest district in the state, but left to become assistant superintendent of a small urban school district and now leads another larger (7500 students in 11 schools), urban school district with a mostly minority student enrollment. She was the first female appointed to this position in her county. This school district has been in the newspapers for the past few years due to its political problems both in the school district and the city in which it is located, very low student achievement, and violence in the schools. In her late forties, she is an African-American, single parent with a daughter in graduate school and has a partner.

Dr. NR '89 spent all her career in the largest district in the state and left the deputy superintendent position when she was wooed by a suburban district with 6,300 students in 9 schools to become the first female, African-American superintendent in that county. She is in her early fifties. Her son is grown and her husband is a teacher in another school district. She had an elaborate entry plan which brought her into every school so that she could early on interact with teachers and influence the curriculum and instruction of the school district.

Dr. PD '94, who actually completed her dissertation in the early months of her superintendency by interviewing female school superintendents in the state, is married to another superintendent. They have four children and also grandchildren. She is white, in her early fifties and is the only one of the group who was not an oldest child. She entered her fourth school district as the superintendent, the second woman in the county. Her rural district has just over 2000 students in 3 schools. This district would be most like the "starter" districts mentioned by Tallerico and Burstyn (1994).

Each woman is driven by her educational vision for her school district. Their rallying cry is, "What is best for students ?" This differs as the districts and the women

differ, but all focus on the learning of their students. That each woman values and feels personally responsible for the cognitive and social learning experience of each individual child dominated the discussion. Dr. JM talked about receiving pictures and notes from some of her youngest students after their playground had been paved. Each superintendent makes administrative visibility in the schools for either themselves or their administrators a priority.

Multicultural education was seen not solely as a racial issue, but also one of class, gender, and religion that should result in mutual respect for differences. A 20 year old case of sexual harassment by a teacher which just surfaced in the media was immediately investigated by the superintendent and resulted in the proclamation of the school board policy publicly read at the next school board meeting. This pro-active stance as opposed to the covering-up activities of previous male superintendents was common to the women.

A lot of time is spent listening to others including various groups such as service support people (bus drivers, for example) in such a way that open communication could take place. Dr. NR spoke directly of modeling behavior and all the women were engaged in showing their administrative staff that confrontation or dictatorial directives were generally ineffective communication tools.

They went through routines such as the budget process following past practice all the while studying it in order to make revisions for the next year. In the case of the budget, each one was going to make it a more open process with more information available to more people earlier in the year.

The superintendents talked to the media to give them their side of the story hoping that the press would be more positive than negative, although they realized that good news doesn't make news. Dr. NR writies a local newspaper column which provides a forum for her viewpoint and an opportunity to educate the public.

They know that the performance that gets monitored is what is done so Dr. SR tracks that principals observe teachers in their classrooms before writing summative teacher evaluations. Now that the need for quantity is understood, she is going to work on the quality of their classroom observations.

The biggest surprise these women got was the positive feedback that they got for being in the schools and available. This amused them as they felt that was an essential part of their job, to know what was happening in the schools.

Because all four women entered a new school district as superintendent they were outsiders. However, the smallest district with an administrative group of eight other people was ten times larger than the "starter" districts mentioned earlier. None of them live in their district except Dr. JM maintains an apartment there where she stays during the week. They generally attend meetings or functions within the district three or four nights per week which often means fourteen hour work days and try to maintain the weekend as personal or family time.

Each entered with an elaborate entry plan involving interviews with many people both in and outside of the schools to learn about the district. The entry strategies used by the women were remarkedly similar even to the point of having been influenced by the same book. Everyone had a well defined entry plan in order to collect information and to start data recording processes if not already available in their district. Having a process for studying their new school district as all were outsiders, enabled the women to indicate during the early months that they could not indicate precise goals for the district until this process was completed and then a goal oriented plan would be forthcoming based on input from all stakeholders. This process went fairly smoothly in most districts except the large urban district where crisis events such as a drive-by shooting would need immediate responses about children's safety rather than a very measured, "I'm trying to get a complete picture of the district before

we develop a strategic plan."

Considerable time was spent by the women discussing staff evaluation and hiring practices with all considering that these efforts would most likely result in improved educational programs for children. The two larger districts had an administrator sole for personnel, one of which was a newly designated position. In the two smaller districts the superintendents personally interviewed all teachers before hiring.

Everyone had previously been an assistant superintendent so were not new to central office responsibilities, although Dr. NR has not experienced the close interaction with a school board in her big city instructional position. However, they were all dismayed that boards gave more consideration to political issues than to what was best for children. Dr. PD, having been a superintendent's wife, still did not anticipate the board's politicalness or their lack of respect for the educational level of the person they had hired to be their superintendent. Each clearly understands the financial limitations of the particular community in which they work, but putting politics above children remains discouraging to them. Yet Dr. SR has found that the board went along completely with her hiring "wish list" and continues to work cooperatively with her as long as she provides them the data and rationale for a given decision and she focuses on a solid educational program. Meanwhile Dr. JM's board had been replaced by a state appointed control board as the school board, which was running the district prior to her appointment, actually had been externally controlled by one political party. Considerable time has been spent in educating the school board members in order to help them understand their responsibility is not only to fiscally conservative taxpayers, but also to the education of the district's children.

Even though this was not an interview question much conversation did ensue over the differ ways male and female superintendents handle their jobs. Based on

their previous experiences, monthly meetings of the superintendents in four different counties, and the expectations of people in their districts; these woman noted that men seem more likely not to listen, to bury or ignore or cover up problems, and to issue directives rather than involve the appropriate people in problem solving activities. Dr. NR meets "with the guys" (her administratice cabinet) at the beginning of each week and they started waiting for her to develop an agenda and to issue directives while she wanted this to be a group taking initiative as to the problems and the solutions.

None of the women felt that their spouse or partner was required to be at most of the school or social school board events which they attended. Dr. PD, who had attended many of her superintendent husband's events prior to her own appointment, as that was expected. However, her school board doesn't expect her husband to attend. The role of the superintendent's spouse is clearly defined by gender; wives attend, but husbands need not.

All the woman are working incredibly hard and for long hours. While they strive for more balance between their personal life and their professional life, they really had understood that especially for the first few years in a new position this would happen. Most of their partners know that the job is probably number one for the woman as it is for most men. More conflict or guilt can result when there are young children or grandchildren involved. Yet that vision of what schools should look like and the desire to get to that point drives them to try to do all the things that should be done.

Discussion

While the women were driven to work extremely long hours as Pavan (1988a) found in her earlier survey of all Pennsylvania female superintendents; their vision of making schools better for children led them to educate their boards, parents, the

general public, and the media in terms of both information and appropriate behavior. Each came armed with an entry plan to gather data, become informed about the district, and to demonstrate an open communication style. This study process proceeded fairly smoothly except in the urban school district which was also the largest and clearly the most distressed. The budget process was their first testing ground and while modest increases were passed, this procedure will be substantially changed for the second year by increasing input, public information, and starting earlier. Personnel hiring and evaluation was considered as an important use of their time as this would most influence the quality of the instruction. The superintendents of the smaller districts were quite directly involved in these processes while the women in the larger districts instituted new positions to handle these functions. Working with the board and individual members requires enormous amounts of time which will continue to be necessary, however there is some evidence that the emphasis on data, children's needs, and open communication is being picked up by some board members. With one exception, the balance of personal and work demands continues to be an issue of conflict slowly being resolved as weekends are reserved for family.

These women all use the "interactive leadership" style as defined by Rosener (1990) in her study of managerial women. They "encourage participation" by involving others using forums such as town meetings, "share power and information" by having administrators decide the cabinet agenda and providing data to all, "enhance the self-worth of others" by insisting that principals who bring them problems also make a recommendation for a solution, and "energize others" by their own enthusiasm when talking about the students. This "power to" approach was noted in Brunner's case of another female superintendent (1995.)

The interactive, open style of these female superintendents is in stark contrast to the 24 male superintendents who Blumberg (1985) reported took a reactive stance to

conflict attempting to defuse it quickly and avoid if at all possible. They confided in their wives not other superintendents and their greatest dilemma was when to "use one's chips' as their style was the bargaining or bartering style. The differences may not only be in gender as these women noted that male superintendents new to the job were more likely to be concerned with the students and willing to share. A recent book by Beck (1994) entitled *Reclaiming Educational Administration as a Caring Profession* provides additional evidence that caring may be a quality now more respected in the profession, if not by school boards, in the 1990's.

Conclusions

These women, all experienced as assistant superintendents, upon entering new districts as the superintendent regardless of size or type of district or their own personal characteristics indicated these issues and strategies.

1. Politics. While dismayed due to the board's emphasis on issues other than children understood the need for attention to other stakeholders. Initial reaction was one of dismay, but quickly recognized the need to deal with it.

2. Planning. Started with a formal entry plan so that study time would be allowed. Provided a written district plan after several months of study with goals on which district activities would focus. Continues to refer to the district plan to justify district and budget activities.

3. Learning / open communication. Interviewed all major stakeholder groups and spent considerable time in the schools. Sought and responded to all forms of communication in an open, honest manner by providing whatever information was needed. Reacted to criticism as if it might be helpful rather than in a defensive manner. Would investigate issues and report rather than try to cover up.

4. Board relations. Worked to train and educate the board as to their responsibilities by providing the needed information in a timely manner. Spent time to orient new board members.

5. Study past practices. Year one was used to study past practices such as the budget process, hiring and evaluation in order to modify for the next year. Also to investigate different procedures for activities such as collective negotiations which are not yearly issues.

6. Changing behavior. Rather than using the directive approach would model desired behavior even pointing out the behavior she was using such as creative problem solving rather than confrontation to education the staff. Set in motion monitoring procedures such as monthly reports to principals on number of teacher observations which each had completed.

7. Personal / work balance. While aware of the importance, most need to continue to protect their personal or family time. Living outside of the district and not being available on weekends are the strategies currently used.

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algae and soil bacteria have produced these gas bubbles. This process is what leads to the make up of glucose that makes up the **"stuff"** in the log.

- **Results**

  Soil is not solid but composed of a variety of characteristics, one of which that soil holds water and air that make up the glucose that makes up the "stuff" in the log.

Assessing Student Learning:

- Have students make predictions as to where the tiny gas bubbles are coming from;
- Have students test other soil samples and make predictions as to what characteristics make up the different samples of soil;
- Have students grow plants in different soil samples to test the different characteristics of soils.

Scientific Process Skills:

- observing, data recording, quantification, inferring, comparing

Materials:

- Bolltes, soil samples, water, log, twig, seed, graduated cylinders

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